

CUSTER COUNTY - FACING THE FEAR

"There was many a night the kids and I hid in a haystack." -- Reflection from a Custer County woman who looks back into 25 years of domestic violence

It didn't take long for the beatings to start.

"I got my first slapping up on the third night I was married," Marie said. "That isn't a honeymoon.

"I was so ignorant, I didn't know people even did that. The folks never talked about anybody being mean or beating up their wives, but I learned real quick."

*Marie's parents were older when she was born. An only child, she grew up in the security of a loving home on her parent's Nebraska ranch: "I had wonderful, solid parents. My folks weren't well to do but they had means, they owned their farm and had cattle."

Marie's future husband had his eye on her parent's means, too. They had started dating while in high school. He was a senior, and a star football player and boxing champ with a large build and strength to match. Marie was a petite freshman and innocent as new-fallen snow. She went off to college following graduation, but when her father died two years later, Marie quit school and came back home to help with the ranch.

The two had continued to date, and with no father or brothers to take over the ranch, "that's when he came on strong," Marie said of her future husband. "I'm not sure who was more serious, but I think he thought if we got married he would never have to work.

"As I look back now, I can see that he was very manipulative. He was always charming. He'd bring me flowers and was right there when you needed help. He was working his way in, and as a young girl I thought that was great because we were needing help on the ranch."

There were warnings, but not the direct warnings this uninformed 19-year-old needed to hear: "I see now people were trying to warn me. Even some of his relatives said, 'you better look somewhere else, there's a lot of other fishes in the sea'."

THE INK ON the marriage license was barely dry when Marie got her first warning of what was to come throughout her married life.

"We were married just three days and I wanted to go see the 4th of July fireworks. So I went into the pool hall and wanted him to come out. He said he'd come out when he felt like it. When he got home that's when I got slapped up bad because I was trying to tell him what to do. I cried the first year we were married."

Marie knew she'd made a mistake when she walked down the aisle, but it was the early 1950s: "Back then there was nothing," she explains. "If you went to the church most ministers would tell you to go back and work it out. And women on the ranches were so isolated they didn't have any place to go to. I went to my mother once. She said I know it's not good but you made your bed so you have to sleep in it. It was bad."

When Marie's husband wanted to buy a farm, he convinced her to get the money from her mother. Marie's mother sold her farm and gave the young couple the down payment, but now Marie's responsibilities only increased in addition to the violence.

Not only was she taking care of most of the duties on the farm and trying to pay the debt, there were four young children to raise while her husband was hardly ever home. "He spent 90 percent of his time playing pool. He was not a drinker and he didn't smoke -- he had no vices except he was mean. He always came home about 1 a.m. because the pool hall would close around then. It would get so that I would just wake up at that time. If the cattle got out or if something wasn't right, you'd get a beating when he got home ... you'd always get a beating.

"One time when the baby woke up and started to cry -- he was around six months old -- he picked him up and threw him against the wall. He fell down and just crawled into a fetal position. If he got mad, it wouldn't matter who he beat, whoever was handy, and anybody else around would get a yelling or knocked around. (One of my children) doesn't hear on one ear because of getting hit so much on that one side. I still feel a lot of guilt about all that.

"(The beatings) were very often. You never knew when it was coming. He was working on a tractor and dropped the battery and kicked the dog like it was a football in the air. I said something and I got a beating. I didn't go into town for a long, long time because of the bruises."

WHEN THE CHILDREN were elementary age, Marie had to take a job at the ordnance plant in Grand Island so she could provide health insurance for her family.

For five years she worked the night shift, leaving for work at 10 p.m. after the children were sound asleep in their beds. Marie knew her husband would be home at his usual time -- around 1 a.m.-- and the children were careful not to disquiet their father. It was one of the hardest things Marie ever had to do, but she saw no other way to provide the security of insurance they needed.

Leaving was never far from Marie's mind, but the fear kept her from putting the plan into action. Fear of how she would support the children or find day care. Fear of losing her children and the life they would have to live without her protection, and even worse would be the extra beatings should she try to get away.

"There were many a night the kids and I hid in a haystack," she said. "And there were times if I knew he was going after one of the kids, I'd get between them and him, and let him beat on me first because I knew that would tire him and they wouldn't get it so bad."

Marie wasn't allowed by her husband to have any material items. "My mother got me a record player and I felt so happy to have it. Did I ever get a beating for that. One time he found two Avon candles a friend gave me. I got a beating for that, too, because he didn't like her husband. He never liked to see anybody happy. If he wasn't happy, nobody better be happy."

Though Marie tried to keep the abuse behind closed doors because of the shame she felt and the stigma she didn't want to be placed on her children, it was no secret: "One of my friends came over and she had only \$248, but she wanted to give me that \$248 so I would take my children and leave, so different ones knew I was being abused. I probably weighed 100 pounds soaking wet."

IT WAS HOPE that kept her alive when she thought the beatings would leave her dead. That hope prompted her to make the decision to leave when the children were out of high school.

Yet even after they had graduated, Marie held off leaving, not wanting to split the family apart.

But she knew the time had come to bring her plan to fruition when she had gotten beaten so badly it left her head looking like a basketball. Marie's husband then pushed her down the basement and locked the door. What he didn't know was that there was a phone down the

basement. Marie called the sheriff. "I was unrecognizable when they took me to the doctor. I always told (my husband) you can beat me until I die but you'll never change my mind. You'll never make me think that it's alright."

Marie didn't press charges because their daughter's wedding was only months away and she didn't want the family divided at the wedding. She wanted that day to be the happiest it could for her daughter.

However, there was more than a wedding taking place.

Behind the scenes, Marie's long thought-out plan had been quietly taking place at the same time wedding plans were being made, and she had the full support of her children. "I had everything ready. My daughter (that was getting married) had things lined up and an apartment ready for me. She was the beating child. (My husband) picked on her because you couldn't change her mind, either. She used to cry when she was little and say, 'Momma, please don't go back.' She was right, but you do the best you can at the time."

The morning after the wedding, Marie waited nervously for her husband to wake up. "He came down and I said, 'I want a divorce and I'm leaving and I walked out the door.'"

Before Marie's husband was able to come to grips with what he had just heard, she was in the car and out the driveway. Even then, she drove around for a while, assuring herself she was doing the right thing. Her upbringing had laid its foundation deep within her -- no one in her family had ever gotten a divorce. When she arrived at her apartment miles away from her home, her daughter was anxiously awaiting her arrival.

Eventually Marie's husband discovered where she lived and her phone number. The nights were often spent in anxiety when she could hear his pick-up circling her apartment. Although he never tired to enter, she feared for her life, even after the divorce. "He didn't show up at court but when I walked out that door, I expected to be dead," she remembers.

It wasn't the first time she felt divorced from this man she had been married to for 25 years. "Six months after we were married I took the wedding dress, the cake top and the marriage license and put them in a pile in the middle of the yard and burned them. I do really believe from that moment on I was done. In my mind I was divorced from that man. I may have to live with him, I may have had to have his kids, but he never owned me."

AT 45, MARIE was finally free. She had no desire to enter into another relationship, even when her children encouraged her to see someone they described as a "really nice man." He called Marie anyway, just wanting to share a cup of coffee.

Coffee turned into dating, dating into marriage, and eventually the couple bought their own ranch and settled in a part of Nebraska they both loved. As for her qualms about entering into marriage again: "Now I have the most wonderful husband anybody could have," she said with delight, "but you don't know you've got it good unless you've had it really bad. We've been married for 21 years now and I love his children and they love me. Between us we have 32 grandkids and four great-grandkids and all of them call us Grandpa and Grandma. There is no division."

Marie's children are all successful adults in equally successful marriages. Her sons took anger management classes without her knowledge, a fact she's very proud of. "The reason the guilt sticks with me about the abuse on the kids is because at that time that was all I could do. Mother wouldn't back me, I had no brothers or sisters and no men in my life. But I've put some of the guilt away and I don't pull it out because I get myself upset."

Though she didn't have her mother's support during the marriage, she still attributes much of her strength to her parents. "Had I not had that solid upbringing, my parenting skills wouldn't have been as good. I learned from my parents how to do things when I got into that my marriage."

This survivor has turned her feelings of guilt into positive action. Marie is currently an advocate in eight counties and is often called upon to help other women secure shelter. However, advocacy is something she's been doing for a long time. "Even when I was married I was doing a little bit. My (ex-) husband was never home so he didn't know."

"Help for abused women have come so far since I was abused -- they have a vehicle, which was something I didn't have, and now we put crisis information everywhere. It's the education getting out to women that makes a difference, but you can't always act on it quickly when children are involved."

What she does find frustrating about the court system, however, is when the victim is unable to know immediately if the partner is getting out on bail.

"Not long ago a man tried to kill his wife. I went to court with her. He was arraigned first thing in the morning and she wanted to know if he was going to get out on bail so she could find safety, and we couldn't find out. I think it should be mandatory for the county attorney to notify the victim immediately of the outcome of the sentencing. If I hadn't of had a good relationship with the county clerk, we wouldn't have known. It's not a secret. It's just that no one seems to know right away while they're going through paperwork. There would have been enough time there for him to kill her ... they need to know."

Marie no longer has to wake up at one in the morning, fearing the nightly attacks, or endure the senseless beatings.

She's grateful for her children's support that brought her out of the domestic violence, but the memories cut deep.

"Abuse goes deep into the heart. That's something you don't really get over. You learn to live with it, but it's there and it will be there forever ... it never really goes away."

- Marie is not the subject's real name.

GET HELP FOR DOMESTIC ABUSE:

* Make a plan in case you need to leave. Set aside some money and find a place to go. Put important papers and items in a place where you can get them quickly. Review a full checklist of items you'll need, such as marriage license, birth certificates and checkbook.

* If you're in danger, call the police or leave.

* Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 800-799-SAFE or TDD 800-787-3224 which is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in English, Spanish, and other languages. The Helpline can give you phone numbers of local domestic violence shelters and other resources.

* Look up state resources for a list of local places to get help.

* Reach out to someone you trust

*Contact your family court (or domestic violence court, if offered by your state) for information about getting a court order of protection.

<http://womenshealth.gov/violence/types/domestic.cfm>